

Kitsap mental health officials search for answers after court ruling

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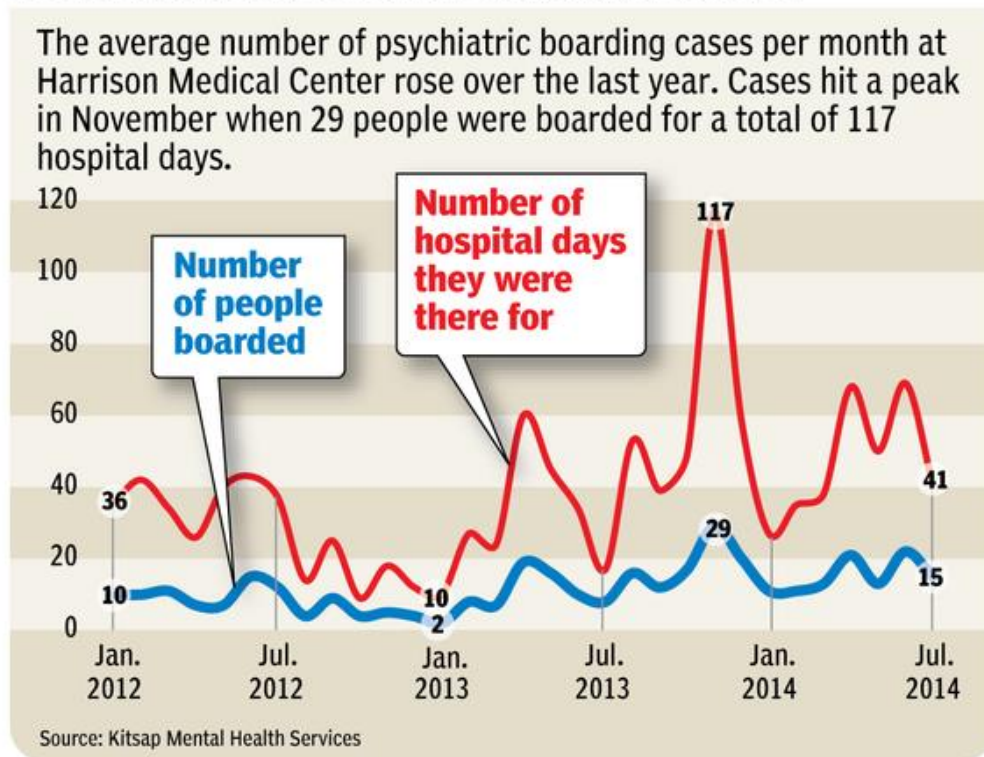
Kitsap Sun

6:46 PM, Aug 13, 2014

7:34 PM, Aug 13, 2014

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PSYCHIATRIC BOARDING IN KITSAP



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BREMERTON — Each month, about 20 people suffering severe mental crises are involuntarily held at Harrison Medical Center.

The patients are temporarily “boarded” at the hospital if they are deemed at risk of hurting themselves or others, and no beds at psychiatric care centers are open in the

state. Used as a last resort to keep dangerously-distressed people off the streets, the widespread practice of psychiatric boarding is about to end in Washington.

The state Supreme Court ruled last week that involuntarily treating psychiatric patients at hospitals is unlawful without a physical health concern. Gov. Jay Inslee gave health officials until Aug. 27 to comply.

Advocacy groups for the mentally ill applauded the ruling, which stemmed from a Pierce County case, as a catalyst for providing adequate psychiatric care in the state. Local health officials warned the decision eliminates a critical stopgap in an underfunded and overcrowded mental health system.

Representatives of Harrison, Kitsap Mental Health Services, Peninsula Regional Support Network and law enforcement said they are working together to brace for the change. But they've received no clear guidelines from the state for how psychiatric boarding will be phased out.

Bremerton Police Chief Steve Strachan fears those patients will be released into the public without treatment.

"I don't think psychiatric boarding is an option anyone thinks is a good idea, but it's the only option available," Strachan said. "The ruling is going to be bad for public safety, at least in the short term."

Psychiatric patients are often taken to the hospital emergency department following an encounter with law enforcement. Other times they are brought by family or self-admitted. Hospital staff evaluate the patient and call in a designated mental health professional to make a psychiatric assessment if needed. The mental health professional can order patients held up to 72 hours if they're considered dangerous or severely disabled.

The patients are transferred to psychiatric care centers when possible, but those beds can be hard to come by, said Joe Roszak, CEO of Kitsap Mental Health Services. KMHS maintains 25 inpatient beds, 15 for adults and 10 for juveniles. They are nearly always full. Roszak said involuntarily treated patients from West Sound are referred to centers as far away as Yakima. If no beds are available, the patients have been boarded at Harrison under single-bed certifications.

A recent Seattle Times investigation found the use of psychiatrist boarding had reached “epidemic” proportions in Washington, as hundreds of mental health beds were eliminated and programs were slashed over the past decade. More than 2,500 patients were involuntarily treated in King County hospitals last year, according to the Times.

The issue is less severe in Kitsap where relatively few patients are boarded and hospital stays are typically short. The number of boardings fluctuates dramatically in the county but averages about 20 per month (see graphic). Harrison has a staff psychiatrist who can consult with patients and manage medications.

“We try to create as much of a therapeutic setting as possible within the environment of a general hospital,” Harrison psychiatrist Dr. Kathryn Rahn said.

Local health officials hope the state will step forward with a long-term plan to add mental health beds in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling, while providing short-term direction.

“We’re trying to take care of the patient, and do what’s right for the patient,” said Dr. Michael Anderson, chief medical officer at Harrison. “We’ll do our best to follow (the ruling), but they’re putting us in a difficult position.”